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ABSTRACT

To help clarify the meaning of three social constructs (class, race/ethnicity, and gender) that have been persistent indicators of reading ability, a literature review examined 393 research reports published between 1985 and 1989 in four major journals that commonly present research on reading. Articles for the review were selected regardless of methodology or focus. Class, race/ethnicity, and gender information was recorded for each of seven questions around which the review was organized. Results indicated: (1) researchers who considered poverty, race/ethnic minority status, and gender provided useful clues but not enough for a robust analysis; (2) 41% of the studies did not identify respondents' class, gender, or race/ethnicity; and (3) almost all the studies were virtually devoid of consciousness that respondents bring complex histories to research episodes. Findings suggest that the studies reviewed did not illuminate links between reading ability and its persistent social markers. (Sixty-five references are attached.) (RS)

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The Question of Readers in Reading Research

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The Question of Readers in Reading Research

Three social constructs have been persistent indicators of reading ability: class, race/ethnicity, and gender. Poverty and minority status have consistently signaled deficiencies, while gender effects have varied.

In order to help clarify the meaning of the indicators, I examined 393 research reports published by four major journals in the past five years. I designed the review to consolidate the work and analyze it for potential solutions of the seemingly intractable deficit markers.

The review begins with data on reading ability and the apparently interrelated social constructs. The second section presents pertinent cautions for interpreting research. Next is the review method, followed by results. The conclusion discusses alternative explanations of the paucity of studies relevant to deficit indices and missing data on all readers.

Reading Ability and Social Constructs

The National Assessment of Educational Progress' (NAEP) recent report confirms long-standing evidence that students in families with the least economic and social resources are the least proficient readers (Educational Testing Service, 1990a, pp. 54-65). Moreover, in the period covered, 1971 to 1988, Black and Hispanic students lagged substantially behind Whites, though they made gains when Whites improved only slightly. (The NAEP report specifies solely these groups.)

Reports on gender vary. In the NAEP's, boys seem less able than girls but they begin to recover in high school. Other large national samples show no difference by high school (Tittle, 1986). However, boys have outperformed girls on Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) verbal tests since 1972, reversing earlier gender patterns (Rosser, 1989). These tests also reveal interconnections of class and race/ethnicity with gender: Girls' scores decline with decreasing family income and parental education (Appendix H) and with race/ethnic minority status (Table 19). The latter is confirmed, as is evidence of high school girls' lower reading scores, in a large-scale national study not restricted to college aspirants as the SAT is (Winfield & Lee, 1986).

The urgency of clarifying the social constructs' association with reading at all school levels emerges from evidence that ever more students may be encountering reading problems. Rising proportions of families and children live at and below poverty levels (Bureau of the Census, 1990, Tables 750 and 747, respectively). Again, class, race/ethnicity, and gender intersect. Poverty occurs mostly in Black and Hispanic families with children and where women are the householders (Table 744). The race/ethnic factor is underscored in projections of a faster-growing Black than White child population by the year 2010 (Table 18) and an update (Pear, 1990) showing half the Black children under six and 40 percent of the Hispanic were poor in 1989. Including the 17 percent of poor whites, approximately 20 percent of all children live in poverty. (Demographic categories reflect those in the sources cited.)

The Commission on Reading (1985) predicts gains for poor students whose teachers follow its recommended practices (p. 124). However, the

Commission's own support for such a prognosis equivocates. While satisfied with its research base (pp. v-viii), it admits that knowledge about reading is incomplete and the power of social science methods has been modest (p. 4).

Cautions in Interpreting Research

Three cautions for reviewing research emerge from analyses of the social constructs. Evidently, the survey data only suggest problems that researchers must refine through inquiry into respondents' particular experience. Individuals' identities vary with constellations of circumstances in respect to class, gender, and race/ethnicity. Personal mediators of social contingencies also vary.

The first caution involves respondents' identity. Class is a blended product of dissimilar levels of analogous occupational orientations, educational backgrounds, economic wherewithal, life experiences (Hodges, 1964), ethnicity across race (Coleman & Rainwater, 1978), and perceptions of prestige or aspirations (Jackman & Jackman, 1983). Single, seemingly objective criteria obscure the blend and confound relevant variables. Census Bureau poverty classifications rely on family income in relation to a 1961 economy food plan (Bureau of the Census, 1990, p. 423), ignoring contemporary cost factors such as rent, child care, and special nutritional needs. Class categories assumed from parents' educational attainment or community residence, as in NAEP reports, are more problematic. The former, particularly relevant where mothers are the only parent present, overlooks women's income patterns: typically lower than men's with less education when both work full time and year-round (National Committee on Pay Equity, 1989). The latter obscures neighborhood diversities, e. g., poverty within middle-income areas.

Researchers must also clarify race and ethnicity. Experience varies among, for example, Euro-Hispanics, African-Latins, West Indians, and African-Americans. Their bi-cultural frames of reference may affect reading contexts differently.

Gender, a social construct, and sex, a biological term, must be disambiguated. Unger (1979) and others point out risks of conflating common covariances of sex and gender, which promote constructions of "feminine" and "masculine" ideal types, hence stereotyped perceptions. Researchers must not only scrutinize their own presumptions. They should also clarify whether respondents' present personal or social gender interpretations of the contexts studied (Weiler, 1988), aware of multiplicative effects of gender, race, and class (King, 1988).

A second caution to bear in mind is ability measures' limitations. Each, whether a standardized test or devised for the research, yields an instrument-specific representation of students' array of knowledge. Each may present a tautology of instrument writers' selectivity. Among specific factors researchers should consider are effects of test item topics (Educational Testing Service, 1990b) and "passage independent" questions, those answered correctly without reading a passage (Allington, Chodos, Domaracki, & Truex, 1977; Johns, 1978). Scores may also reflect teaching of test formats in schools (Weaver, 1978), differential operational definitions of reading constructs and criteria of students' growth (Crowell, Au, & Blake, 1983), test construction (Buros, 1972), and biases

related to gender (Scott & Feldman-Summers, 1979) or gender-race-ethnic content (Rosser, 1989).

The third caution implicates the entire research process. It emerges from analyses of potential discrepancies between researchers' and respondents' epistemological sources. Writing from African-Americans' perspective, Gordon, Miller, & Rollock (1990) make a compelling case for sensitivity to communicentric biases. They argue that social science commonly reflects the cultural hegemony of Caucasian male middle-class values and world views. To avoid bias, they urge that respondents participate in formulating hypotheses, which define the terms of an inquiry. The point is to clarify researchers' knowledge of self and those they study (Westcott, 1979), diminishing risks of conflating investigators and respondents as subjects. Smith (1987) observes that societal subordinates possess knowledge unfamiliar to dominants, apt to be the case when respondents are likely candidates for reading inadequacies.

From a feminist perspective, Sherif (1982) recommends care in selecting concepts and methods to avoid interconnected gender, class, race/ethnic, and stereotypes and in interpreting data. Although it is difficult to specify which step in research is most open to bias (Macklin, 1987), practical guidelines developed for avoiding sexism (McHugh, Koeske, & Frieze, 1986) can be adapted to avert classism and racism, also. The guidelines stress the futility of merely finding differences and the importance of examining every aspect of studies for inducement of predictable results.

Reading studies claim particular concerns. Literacy is a social process engaging individuals' personal and also societal interests (Scribner, 1986). Since reading is a private-public phenomenon, respondents' and researchers' interpretations of research materials merit comparison.

In summary, the cautions call for reviewers' alertness to potential research process effects on an inquiry.

Method

The 393 articles reviewed were published between 1985 and 1989 in major journals that commonly present research on reading. Of the total, 368 were identitified as primary research involving readers, 51 in the American Educational Research Journal, 132 in the Journal of Educational Psychology, 79 in the Journal of Reading Behavior, and 108 in the Reading Research Quarterly. Articles designated as "Brief Reports" were excluded to avoid the bias of brevity. Twenty-five articles related to reading but not engaging readers directly (e. g., text analyses) were examined separately.

Articles were selected regardless of methodology or focus, for instance on behavior, cognition, or contexts. In positivist studies reading could be independent or dependent variables. In ethnographic or descriptive research, reading could be specified at any point.

The review was organized around seven questions distilled from the literature cited above: Were respondents' poverty status, race/ethnicity minority group membership, and gender identities clearly established? What was the source of hypotheses, if any? How did researchers ascertain respondents' understanding of observed activities and materials? If ability was evaluated, were limitations of measures addressed? Are

interrelated aspects of reading considered? What generalizations are offered? What is the methodology? Class, race/ethnicity, and gender information was recorded in respect to each question.

Results

Results are reported as percentages rounded to whole numbers. Totals thus do not necessarily equal to 100 percent.

Class

There was only one study of children who might have been poor, which did not subsume data on them within aggregated class groups. The children's class is uncertain, since no criteria defined the designation, "low socioeconomic." One report referred to a "lower class" research location without identifying respondents' status. Three others described readers as "working class" (uninterpreted); the term encompasses many factors, such as income and education. Only the first study noted here considered gender. None considered race/ethnicity.

Sixty-six percent did not identify readers' class in any way. Of those that did, the largest proportion, 10 percent, listed "middle-class." Another 56 percent reported "mixed" class groups or specified a diversity, but only one percent of the latter (which included no version of poverty) bracketed results for class variability. Of the approximately one-third noting class, 84 percent cited no information source and 81 percent provided no criteria for classifications; 23 percent referred to respondents, 25 percent to total school populations, and 22 percent to the research area.

Race/ethnicity

Five investigations focused on race/ethnic minority groups. One involved Black students and one compared Black and White. Neither indicated ethnicity, which might have affected results. (For example, my African-American students recognized metaphors tested in one study but the African-Jamaicans did not.) Two studies reported on Hispanics not defined for ethnicity or race. Only one study, of four Mexican-Americans undifferentiated for race/ethnic particulars, analyzed respondents' diverse interactions with an array of reading-related experiences. None considered class or gender.

Within their limits, a theme emerged from the five studies for consideration in future research: Minority students possess competence not acknowledged in past investigations of them.

In 77 percent of the studies there were no race/ethnic descriptors of readers. Among the remainder, 10 percent were of Whites and 16 percent of mixed groups, none with disaggregated data. None of this majority of reports considered race/ethnicity in research processes.

Gender

No reports described respondents' gender identities, either generally or as interpreted in the research setting. However, nine, two percent of the total, observed various gender functions in aggegrated groups. Mostly, these merely noted predictable female and male behavior, e. g., choice of courses. Two suggest factors to consider in future research. In one, exposure to nontraditional female activities in stories affected girls' and boys' perception of possible activities. Another, perhaps unintentionally, illustrates potentially distorting effects of discrepant researchers' and

respondents' viewpoints: Teachers who were consulted on children's interest in a passage noted gender relations in the text. This observation was incorporated in the study of youngsters to penalize noticing those relations as a deficiency in comprehending important ideas.

Fifty-four percent of the reports did not note whether respondents were female or male. Of those specifying the presence of both sex groups, only 22 percent mentioned any relevance of the inclusion. These merely recorded statistical facts of difference: 19 percent found none and seven percent did but offered no explanation. Neither the three studies of girls only nor the six of boys only analyzed the segregation. No investigators other than those studying the effects of story characters', discussed above, reported attention to gender factors in materials, activities, or conclusions. None at all considered interacting gender, class, and race/ethnic effects.

Hypotheses

Two studies of two different race/ethnic minority groups were not delimited by hypotheses. Instead, analytical categories were developed from related literature. In only one of these, of four students, the investigator interviewed respondents for perspectives on most of the research questions. Neither considered class or gender. Thus, there is no basis for analyzing relationships of hypotheses to readers' experience in respect to the indices of reading difficulties.

In 95 percent of the studies, investigators generated hypotheses solely from previous research, revising one or two features of earlier work. Class, race/ethnic, and gender factors in predecessor investigations were not considered.

Only two percent of all the investigations were not prestructured by hypotheses. Three studies derived hypotheses from observations without consulting respondents. None of the foregoing, except the two identified above, considered any of the social indicators of reading ability.

Another two percent developed original hypotheses based on previous investigations; none engaged respondents in the process. Only one is relevant to the main purpose of this review, but merits attention: Discrimation against Black students was observed in assigning them to "low" reading groups.

Respondents' perception of activities and materials

Only the study of four Mexican-Americans, cited above, established respondents' perspectives on the selected activities and materials, but it by-passed class and gender. The research on gender effects of stories, cited earlier, aggregated results and ignored class and race/ethnicity. There is thus no information to consolidate and analyze in respect to the indices of reading difficulties and perceptions of research events.

In 93 percent of investigations no inquiries at all were conducted. Of the remainder, positivist researchers typically distributed printed forms to groups, delimiting answers, e. g, asking if an instructional treatment had been helpful. Ethnographic studies were approximately equally divided between exclusive reliance on researchers' own interpretaton of respondents' perspectives and interviews to ascertain that.

Aspects of reading

The same study of a race/ethnic minority group which inquired into respondents' perspectives on the research processes also examined diverse reading-related events in and out of the classroom. All others

investigated isolated aspects of reading. Thus, research on letter-sound recognition ignored children's knowledge of written words and stories; text comprehension was operationalized with no reference to reading constructs.

Ability evaluations

All the studies referred to respondents' reading ability. Fifty-five percent used standardized reading tests in whole or part. One in this group referred readers to a source that evaluated the instrument selected; none discussed possible effects of the measures' biases or limitations. No instruments constructed for an investigation were examined for related competence outside the research event or for cultural effects.

Generalizations

One investigation focused on a race/ethnic minority group restricted generalizations to respondents' thought and behavior in the settings observed. It ignored class and gender contexts.

Forty-three percent of the investigations universalized results in relation to cognitive processes or behaviors predicted by hypotheses. A similar proportion, 41 percent, delimited these phenomena to smaller universes, such as children, students, or beginning readers. Fewer, 14 percent, generalized findings to all good and/or poor readers and four percent to children in the same school grade as the research participants. In all cases statistical data analyses justified conclusions. Only two percent confined generalizations to the populations studied.

Methodology

Two ethnographic studies involved two different race/ethnic minority groups. Neither analyzed gender or class variables.

Ninety-six percent of the research was experimental or quasi-experimental and almost four percent was descriptive. All of these adapted positivist methodologies recommended for scientific behavioral research (Kerlinger, 1986). Researchers hypthesized cognitive processes or behaviors, constructed boundaries of observations, and verified conclusions by relating inferential statistical data to hypotheses. The remaining investigations, including two case studies, adapted ethnographic or qualitative methodologies (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). These researchers sometimes offered hypotheses, included observations in diverse settings, e. g, respondents using books or discussing instruction, and drew conclusions from the observations. Quantification strategies varied with investigators' purposes.

Additional results

Twenty-five reports analyzed basal readers, teacher manuals, teachers' attitudes, and methodological issues. Of the last- named, one argued for programs for disadvantaged children. Another analyzed limitations inherent in experimental studies of classroom reading. The remainder do not contribute materially to this review's questions.

I searched the 368 reports on readers to find data not initially considered but possibly amplifying the review. The search, summarized below, was fruitless.

Seventy-eight percent mentioned respondents' age and 80 percent reported school level. Only one study related these attributes to the research. Overall, 25 percent investigated college students, none noting their age.

Twenty-seven percent noted respondents' location, e. g., urban, suburban, or the name of a city or country. None commented on the site's

relevance.

Of the 368 studies, 14 percent ignored participants' location, class, race/ethnicity, gender, and sex. Readers were described only as, for example, third graders or undergraduates.

Conclusions and Discussion

The 393 studies did not illuminate links between reading ability and its persistent social markers. Researchers who considered poverty, race/ethnic minority status, and gender provided useful clues, but not enough for a robust analysis. Indicative of the disinterest in social realities, 41 percent did not identify respondents' class, sex, or race/ethnicity.

A serious question thus emerges from the review. Why is there so little interest in the social factors affecting reading?

One explanation is in the arena of the "paradigm wars" in reading research. Stanovich (1990), defending positivist paradigms and noting the utility of constructivist, advocates peaceful co-existence. But this "treaty" proposal overlooks the oppositional claims. Positivists project universal norms, as found in this review. Such claims are untenable for those who perceive cultural effects on cognition and behavior. They analyze human agency in connection with gender, class, and race/ethnic experience in school and society, rejecting both biological and social determinisms (Weiler, 1988). Refuting conceptions of independent research contents and methods (e. g., Hall, 1989), they argue that positivist researchers are unacknowledged causal agents of their results (Sampson, 1988).

Positivists contribute reasoned hypotheses for investigation. However, the reasoning, as evident in this review, emerges from research communities' thought rather than readers' realities and limits confirmation to statistical inferences. The inferred universal norms create deviance, thus reading strata seem natural despite schools' historical construction of literacy levels through curriculum and testing systems (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). Since the methodology requires no inquiry into its boundaries, it can accept reading levels as functional realities.

Positivism does not necessarily require the scantiness found in this review. Almost all the studies are virtually devoid of consciousness that respondents bring complex histories to research episodes. Omissions of data on the social being of persons engaged in cognitive processes contrasts sharply with detailed statistical information on the processes. Yet, recent philosophers of science have thoroughly contested truth claims based on anonymous "subjects" whose cogition lacks human qualities (Hawkesworth, 1989). Positivists who assume scientific research has no social interest acknowledge subjects' societal attributes and caution against naive use of tests (e. g., Kerlinger, 1986). In other words, there is no methodological demand for the pervasive failures to document respondents' social identities and perceptions of research situations, to evaluate instruments, and to discuss results in relation to such factors.

Gage (1989), a self-described "objective-quantitative researcher," takes the paradigm war to moral ground. He holds researchers responsible for providing knowledge to benefit children, especially the poor. He, too, wants co-existence and shows that some positivist studies apply fragments

of political effects. But morality requires choices of action, for instance, attending to particularities of children's needs (Tronto, 1989). Care of children as abstract quantifiable objects is dubious; they learn within socio-political realities. A moral concern entails choosing examine or ignore their particular situations.

An alternative explanation associates disinterest in gender, poverty, and race/ethnic minorities with interests of dominant groups in society. Students with limited reading ability become available for the lower-paid positions required to sustain the stratified structure of our political economy. Gender variations in reading ability become irrelevant in view of structural relations. Relatively few women gain entrance into higher-status positions; most supply lower level labor force requirements, thus preserving male domination at peaks and at each level of pyramids (Walby, 1986). Indeed, income and SAT verbal score patterns are similarly indexed for gender across race/ethnic lines (National Committee on Pay Equity, 1989 and Rosser, 1989, respectively.)

This explanation aligns positivists' functionalism with the broader political environment. Historically, positivist paradigms have resonated a capitalist patriarchal tradition, avoiding risks of inquiry into hegemonic structuring of mental processes (Sampson, 1978). The tradition encourages study of humans with methodologies emulating physics, where phenomena are observed as voiceless objects (Harding, 1986). By eschewing examination of socially constructed boundaries, postivists seem apolitical but in fact protect them. Studies of poverty, gender, and race/ethnic minority experience might open the proverbial can of worms to challenge systems perpetuating the status quo.

Whether amplifying positivist research could reveal connections between literacy, itself a complex social process, and social constructs is an open question. Ethnographic and qualitative studies hold more promise of analyzing interacting structural and personal dimensions of reading experience. However, as evident in this review, they do not necessarily address class, race/ethnic, or gender experience. Choosing to study implications of reading ability's social indices is evidently independent of methodology.

Nontheless, political realities of children's reading difficulties cannot be dismissed. Rather than conceptualizing paradigm differences in military terms, a thoughtful dialogue on political environments and research interests may be useful.

Meanwhile, insofar as this review reflects current research, there is a dearth of studies on persistent links of reading with gender, poverty, and race/ethnic minorities. Scholars are and should be free to select topics and methodologies. Journal editors may encourage whatever they deem of interest. But without ample research examining the social constructs' functions, we cannot hope to address problems they generate.

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